

## Employee objectification in modern organisations: how to preserve human dignity?

**Jolita Vveinhardt**

*Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania)*

[jolita.vveinhardt@vdu.lt](mailto:jolita.vveinhardt@vdu.lt)

### INTRODUCTION

Despite the fact that we live and work in the 21st century, with the rapid development of technologies that help people, the problem of the person's objectification, however, remains relevant both in the management science and in managerial practice. In the origins of the management science, Frederic Winslow Taylor became famous not only for his experiments and impressive achievements that laid the foundation for the management science. In addition to the fact that F.W. Taylor himself was particularly disliked by trade unions because he looked upon the worker as a tool to achieve a goal, after a century, Taylorism was often criticized in modern organisations for its instrumental approach to the employee (Nawaz, 2011; O'Neill, 2017). Although considerable attention has been paid to instrumentalization that undermines the person's dignity, or, in other words, to objectification in philosophical works, research in the field of the management science has been rather slow to delve into the causes and consequences of this phenomenon (Vveinhardt, 2022). In addition, there is still a lack of clarity on the causes determining the person's dehumanization and objectification in the organisation (Sainz et al., 2023). Organisations aim not only to survive, but also to thrive. However, this is often done at the expense of employees, without evaluating the impact of such popular concepts as 'human resources', 'employee flexibility' and the like on the attitude towards the person.

**The aim of this scoping review** is to determine the main attitudes to the conditions that are related to employee objectification in organisations in the context of human dignity.

**The methods of the research.** The research was conducted using the scoping review method. In the first stage, studies corresponding to the search phrase 'workplace objectification' (N = 74) were selected in the Web of Science (Core Collection) database. This was followed by the selection of articles that looked at objectification from the managerial perspective (N = 9) and that examined dignity (N = 2). In the third stage, the content is analysed and the results are discussed. Reliability was enhanced by having review procedures checked by another researcher.

### Theoretical background

Workplace objectification reflects instrumentality and the denial of humanness in work relationships (Auzoult, 2020). In the scientific literature, the conception of objectification is used in two ways. Objectification is examined as an organisational policy that treats the employee as an instrument to achieve goals, and the employee is depersonalized in the organisational strategy using the metaphor 'human resources' (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021; Mardosas et al. 2021; Vveinhardt, 2022). Such attitude can promote calculation and thinking, emphasizing the supremacy of money and profit over people and community, which at the same time encourages the organisation's employees themselves to objectify others in the work environment (Belmi & Schroeder, 2021).

The organisation's philosophy that instrumentalises the employee is closely related to another perspective – that of the person's objectification. Such perspective emerges through the prism of the person's own self-awareness. That is, when the 'self' is perceived not as a person, but as an object, which leads to the perception of the self without mental states (dementization) or as an instrument (instrumentalization) and as a 'nonperson' (loss of humanness) (Auzoult, 2020). This determines consequences such as depressed mood and self-harm (Dai et al., 2023). Thus, the employee objectification is a complex phenomenon manifesting itself in a dehumanized work environment and undermining the value of the human being as an individual. Therefore, an acute problem of personal dignity becomes apparent in such environment.

Dignity is commonly understood as a personal sense of value, worth, respect or esteem, which is also related to relationships with other persons (Lucas, 2015). Meanwhile, the origin of human dignity is perceived in several ways. The first perspective emphasizes that the dignity of every person living in the world is innate and is usually based on the Judeo-Christian view of the person as created in the image of God (imago Dei) (Vveinhardt, 2022). Such understanding of dignity means that the person's value does not depend on his ethnic origin, religion, financial and social position in the society or other variables. Therefore, all persons must be treated with the same respect.

Other perspectives link dignity to a subjectively experienced sense of value, which may depend on either group-defined standards or self-created personal value. Therefore, the latter is also called meritocratic because it exists, is created (earned) independently and depends on the abilities and efforts made by the individual person (Lucas, 2015). Thus, despite the fact that the term dignity is often used to emphasize concern for employees, relationships with workers are implemented depending on what content is given to this term.

### Main findings

Only two studies matching the search criteria were found, which directly link the person's objectification and dignity (one of these studies is of a theoretical nature). In yet another article, the connection between objectification and dignity emerged indirectly. Not a single article has been found in which dignity would be understood meritocratically or as a person's innate value. The main themes and emerging views of authors are presented in the table below.

Topic	Type of research	Attitude	Source
Awareness of one's influence on co-workers	Review	People who tend to objectify others underestimate intentionality of the latter and overestimate their own influence.	Bohns & Flynn, 2013
Effects of Performance Pressure	Quantitative	Self-objectification can have a positive effect on the role-related behaviour of employees.	Xu et al., 2021
Sexual violence	Qualitative	Abuse of power and corruption of management pave the way to unwanted sexual attention, including non-consensual touching, bullying and objectification.	Newman et al., 2021
The influence of cultural approaches on thinking	Qualitative	The motivation for the objectification of people with large builds stems from broader Western cultural approaches to occupational health.	Lemmon et al., 2022
Sexuality in organisational culture	Qualitative	Women are controlled through the process of objectification, which reinforces vertical gender segregation.	Liu, 2016
Emotions used by managers in communication	Quantitative	The use of positive emotions reduces employees' perception that the manager is objectifying them.	Choi et al., 2023
Artificial intelligence algorithms in management	Quantitative	Management while using artificial intelligence algorithms leads to greater objectification of others.	Granulo et al., 2024
Hiring employees	Qualitative	Hiring that is oriented to transactions (effectiveness, quantity, reward), unlike hiring oriented to development (communality, opportunities, ethics), is associated with employee objectification.	Jackson, 2023
Empowering the leader through objectification	Quantitative	In high power distance organisations, subordinates give more power to the manager who objectifies them, because such behaviour is perceived as appropriate.	Zhang et al., 2023
The link between organisational humanness and leadership	Review	There is a lack of clarity to what extent dehumanization and objectification are different concepts and how they pertain to a broader conception of dehumanization and humanness, including uniquely human qualities.	Harder et al., 2023
The link between unfair resource allocation and self-objectification	Quantitative	Inequality and unfairness increase perceived organizational dehumanization, which is related to greater self-objectification and reducing dignity.	Sainz et al., 2023

### MAIN RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The organisation is a specific social environment in which the attitudes constructed by the society, employees and the organisation itself towards the person and his value interact. Despite the existing evidence that the individual's objectification in the work environment causes negative consequences for both the organisation and its individual members, this phenomenon is more often examined from the perspectives of philosophy and psychology sciences. This scoping review has demonstrated that in order to develop the managerial perspective of employee objectification, a more comprehensive theoretical and empirical analysis of the connection with different conceptions of personal dignity is needed. The main conditions hindering to acknowledge the value of the employee as an individual and not as an instrument are related to cultural trends existing at the levels of the society and organisations. Managerial research conducted in these directions could not only broaden scientific knowledge, but also serve to improve organisational management practices.